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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001889

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SUBJECT: THAILAND POLITICAL UPDATE: REFUGE AT THE MALLS

Classified By: Charge Alex A. Arvizu reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: More rumors from Thaksin's cabinet predicts that the PM may be "taking a break" from politics. Reflecting a change in tactics, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) stationed their demonstration today at Siam Square, the heart of Bangkok's shopping district. Three major shopping malls in the area announced closure for the next two days. The total loss of business for these two days are reportedly estimated to be as high as 600 million baht. A heavy police presence is reported at Siam Square. The police further announced the indefinite street closure of the section of the roads affected by the protest. Meanwhile, up to 5,000 farmers known as the "Network of Farmers in Debt of Thailand" have set up camp in front of the Krungthai Bank Headquarters further down the road. PM Thaksin held his cabinet meeting via video-conference from his hometown of Chiang Mai. Registration for the Senate election on April 19 closed yesterday with a total of 1,477 candidates nation-wide. End summary.

ANOTHER VOTE FOR "TAKING A BREAK"

¶2. (C) On March 27, the Ambassador heard from another TRT stalwart that Thaksin would likely take a "short break" from politics following the election. The Health Minister, who attended a dinner at the residence, volunteered this view. However, the minister seemed to think that the PM would step down for just a few months to allow consideration of amendments to the constitution. The Health Minister suggested that top TRT ministers Somkid (Commerce), Sudarat (Agriculture), or Chaturon (Education) could serve as PM for the interim. He raised the rather odd alternate suggestion that Thaksin could serve as president of Parliament during this interim period. Then, presumably, there would be new elections with all parties participating, in which Thaksin would again head the TRT list. The Ambassador noted that, in his personal view, it seemed unlikely that the strong feelings in Bangkok against the PM would cool down in just a couple of months.

ON THE OTHER HAND...

¶3. (C) At the same dinner, the two Vice Ministers of Health told DCM there was "no way" Thaksin would resign after April ¶2. They suggested the PAD had overplayed their hand by taking their protests to the commercial districts of Bangkok in recent days. Bangkok citizens were growing weary of the commotion and growing more concerned about the impact on the economy. "Thaksin will outlast them (the protesters), you watch."

DEMOCRACY A LA MALL

14. (U) The PAD proceeded to move their demonstration quarters from a location near the Government House (where they have been stationed since March 14) to the Siam Square area for the next two days. They claim that by moving their protest to the center of Bangkok, they could "raise public awareness" of the political situation. In response, three major shopping malls in the area (Siam Paragon, Siam Center and Siam Discovery) announced that they will close their doors for these two days due to traffic considerations. The businesses reportedly pleaded unsuccessfully for the PAD to move the demonstrations elsewhere, as the total loss of sales is estimated to be as high as 600 million baht.

AS IF TRAFFIC ISN'T BAD ENOUGH ALREADY...

15. (C) The Royal Thai Police have a heavy presence in the area, with a reported 450 officers stationed at each of the three temporary command posts. The police stated that the PAD did not apply to use the traffic space in the area. They further warned that they will be imposing a 500 baht fine on PAD protesters violating traffic regulations, only to later announce an indefinite closure of the streets affected by the protest. (Comment: This section of the road is already heavily congested. The street closings would undoubtedly add to the traffic congestion and perhaps cause popular annoyance at the PAD if their activity in Siam Square is prolonged. Also, by 3:00pm, the PAD crowd was only about 2,000 people,

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but it is expected to grow tonight as people get out of work to join the protest. End comment.)

...AND NOW ANOTHER GROUP IS ON THE STREET??

16. (C) A group of farmers from sixteen provinces called the "Network of Farmers in Debt of Thailand" gathered in the Nana section of Sukhumvit Road (two sky train stops away from Siam) early this morning. Poloff estimated the crowd to be around 1,000 people, but numbers as high as 5,000 were reported by the Thai press. This group claimed that they are not affiliated with either the PAD or the pro-Thaksin "Caravan of the Poor," but are independently protesting in front of the Krungthai Bank Headquarters for lower interest rates and reduced loan repayments. The group claims that they will remain in front of Krungthai Bank and will not join the PAD rally further up the street. (Comment: The two protest groups actually on the same road with two different names -- the protesters at the Nana district are yet another group adding to the traffic woes. End comment.)

WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER RACE?

17. (C) Unlike the MP race, the registration for senate candidates closed without a hitch yesterday. A total of 1,477 candidates registered nation-wide for the April 19 election. At the last minute, twenty-seven more candidates registered their names to contest in Bangkok, bringing a total of 260 candidates to run in the capital. According to the Election Commission, this is a decrease of only five candidates from the senate race in 2000.

READING BROADENS THE MIND

¶8. (U) Several papers have published a suggested reading list for Thaksin when he goes on his "post-election break," including "1984," "The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus," and, of course, "Macbeth," an obvious dig at the PM's famously ambitious wife.

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